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ABSTRACT

As college students in a literacy foundation course became pen pals with third graders, individual voices from each group were heard and, on both ends, it was a meaningful, authentic learning experience. The college students from a homogeneous environment were able to communicate with a diverse population of children. The children shared book interest with college students while engaging in authentic letter writing. Through a series of letters, voices surfaced and bonded pen pals. Contains a 7-item list of children's books cited. (Author/RS)

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Do You Hear Me?

The Voices of Preservice Teachers and Third Graders Developing Through a Pen Pal Exchange

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A Paper Presented at the

NCTE Spring Conference

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Carol Moutray

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract

As college students in a literacy foundation course became pen pals with third graders, individual voices from each group were heard and helped each other in many areas. The college students from a homogeneous environment were able to communicate with diverse population of children. The children shared book interest with college students while engaging in authentic letter writing. Through a series of letters voices surfaced and bonded pen pals.

To provide my college students with an introduction to elementary students' reading and writing abilities, I require for my reading foundations class members to pen pal with third graders. The college students, usually sophomores or juniors, with a few non-traditional students, exchange letters 3-4 times during a semester.

The pen pal exchange crossed over several boundaries. First, most college students have had little contact with elementary students since they were in elementary school, at least 10 years before this period in their education process. Consequently, the experience provides authentic contact with elementary students. Second, the college, located in a northeastern mid-sized city surrounded by rural area, has mostly Caucasian students from very homogenous cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The elementary school is located in a suburb of a large Midwest city. The school has a diverse population including African-American and Asian students. Third, the experience allows students to converse distance (Pennsylvania to Missouri), age (8 to 20-30), different backgrounds, and, for some, gender.

To encourage the students' true voices to be heard, teachers did not review the letter writing after the first exchange. For the first letter, the elementary teacher brainstormed ideas for writing topics and reviewed friendly letter format. The college students and I discussed appropriate topics and language for writing to elementary children.

Each group enjoyed and benefited from the exchange. The elementary teacher reported, "The letters certainly caused enjoyment in class!" Similarly, the excited college students remarked, "They're here!" at the sight of the large manila exchange envelope along with the professor's books. A third grader commented on the experience, "This is cool!"

Besides being an authentic experience for college students to interact with elementary students, the exchange gave the third graders authentic audiences for letter writing and book sharing. During the exchange both sets of students discussed books that they were currently reading for class assignments and/or pleasure.

As one begins any new experience, there are doubts about its effectiveness. One college student expressed these feelings after reviewing the letters:

> Another thing I noticed from sharing letters was the similarities that seemed to emerge between my pen pal and I [me]. In my first letter to my pen pal, Natalee, I told her that I was going to be a teacher and that I loved *Goosebumps*. In her next letter, she wrote back saying that she was also thinking about becoming a teacher and adored *Goosebumps*. In another letter I wrote about how I read the book, Charlotte's Web, in her next letter she wrote that she just read Charlotte's Web. The same thing happened with the *Goosebumps* book, The Cuckoo Clock of Doom.
>
> This made me feel good about myself. It made me feel like I affect her life and served as a role model. It made communication easy and the letters flowed like actual phone conversations. This made me glad because when I first found out that my pen pal was from Missouri, I was a little worried if we would have anything in common or if I would have anything to write about. But I soon found out that where we lived was meaningless. We were just two students going to school and reading books. I actually did a little search on Missouri and found that, just like Pennsylvania, it has its share of rural and urban areas. This also gave me confidence as a teacher if, by any chance, I get a job in another state that I am not familiar with.

Elementary students expressed their feelings about the crossover experiences in comments at the end of the letter writing.

"I enjoyed writing to my pen pal. I liked writing to him because he's different. I liked writing back and forth. It was fun."

"I [a girl] like my pen pal because he is a BOY. Some of the other girls got girls, I didn't."

"I did like the pen pal idea to get know people all the way in Pennsylvania. I found someone who liked the same plays I did in the Super Bowl."

Since the elementary teacher wanted her students to start the exchange, the third graders wrote the first letter to *Dear College Student.* My intention was to assign pen pals by numbering the elementary letters and having college students pick a corresponding number 'from a hat.' To provide students with examples of the variety of writing ability in a third grade room, the letters were passed around the room for students to read. One letter from Mike stated:

Hi! How are you? I'm just great. I'm a really big football, hockey, baseball and soccer fan. Who do you want to win the Super bowl Green Bay Packers or New Egland Patriots? I want Green Bay Packers to win the Super Bowl. My favorite players are Dan Marino, John Elway, Drew Bledsoe, Troy Aikma and Favre.

My favorite book is Hockey Super Star. I don't now the Author.

When I announced it was time to select pen pals, Chris blurted, "Can I have Mike?" Chris played football, basketball and track at his high school and was a linebacker for the college team. *One voice crying out for a voice heard.*

So, my well laid plans for assigning pen pals evaporated as one student after another begin to request a certain third grader because of similar interest, the writing, or some attraction that united students. Students' voices begin the exchange, not a teacher's assignment.

As letters continued, voices surfaced and pen pals shared topics of discussion. Huong, Vietnamese, wrote about her pets and that her favorite books were about pets and animals. Renee, college student, reflected on letters and said:

> Perhaps the best part about this pen pal experience was I made a new friend. I was very surprised the first day with Huong's letter because I immediately noticed we shared a common bond: our love for birds. In every single letter Huong and I wrote to each other, we discussed the birds we have now and the birds we had in the past. I could tell from Huong's letters discussing her love for her birds was a topic that made her feel very comfortable. Because I realized this fact, I made sure to write about birds in all of my letters. I felt this was an excellent way to open doors of communication between us.
> *A voice heard, a common ground, a voice answering.*

Sometimes the voice was heard through actions as reported by the third grade teacher. A special education student was very excited about his letters and really tired hard to respond. He even took his letters home to work on so they would be ready for the exchange. He wanted to be heard and enjoyed hearing from his pen pal.

Over a semester nine letters (four exchanges and a final letter) allowed students to discover each other. In addition to letters, the students shared photographs and postcards. Each pen pal received an individual photograph of their special buddy. Group photographs were sent to acquaint each other with classroom settings. After the elementary students sent pictures of their school, playground equipment, and other items of interest, the college students sent pictures of the school mascot and areas around campus. Each group sent postcards of the cities and interesting sites to familiarize the other group with the

local areas. Bulletin boards in each classroom became centers for sharing and learning.

The children asked about other members in the college class, because they heard the names from classmates' letters. The elementary students enjoyed reading their letters aloud and posting them on a bulletin board. The college students passed letters around their instructional tables or read them to the whole class. As a result students learned that Huong and Nhung were cousins from comments in the letters. Along with the letters the students exchanged photographs. When Shawntez (a third grader) saw Danniell's college pen pal's picture, he begin to inquire about Anthony to his pen pal, Cinzia.

From hearing Shawntez's inquiries about Anthony and listening to Danniell's reserved voice in her letters to Anthony, we decided to switch pen pals during the exchange. Both sets benefited from the switch. Cinzia commented about Danniell:

> From what I observed I do believe my pen pal looks up to me. This is because when she was writing to Anthony, in our class, it seemed that she couldn't write to him on a more personal level because he was a boy. Basically I think she and I have more in common because we are females. I also think she liked switching pen pals because she is the only girl in her family besides her mother. I feel she is like my little sister because she asks me about boys and friends. When she began writing to me she changed her stationary from regular loose-leaf paper to pretty cat stationary. She sent me stickers and mini-stationary. She told me that her mother was expecting another child, she is hoping that it is a girl. I think when Anthony and I switched pen pals, it was a smart idea. I believe that both of our pen pals were happy. I had Danniell and Anthony had the opportunity to influence a little African American boy, whom was already fond of Anthony.

When students exchanged pictures, Shawntez started to inquiry about Anthony. He was able to identify with an African American, male college student who wanted to become a teacher. Arranging the pen pal switch, allowed Anthony an opportunity to fulfil some dreams and learn some things about himself as his reflection on the process relates.

Throughout my life, the drive to become a teacher has always been one of my long-term goals. I believe that through teaching I can have a great influence on students and make tremendous impacts in their lives. My only wish is to make a positive change in a young boy or girl's life.

When our class was assigned pen pal letters, I knew that this was my chance to make an impact on someone's life. I wanted my pen pal to be the little brother or sister that I never had. So, you can't imagine how excited I was.

My pen pal's name is Shawntez, and boy is he great. Shawntez taught me things that will definitely influence what and how I teach. Just as any other third grader, he loved the idea of writing letters to his college buddy. These letters gave Shawntez a way to express his interests and many other subjects that he thought were interesting. He also could have a long-distance friend.

Even though I am much older than Shawntez, I learned a tremendous amount from him. He taught me that children are like books with clean pages ready to be written in. The more information you give them, the more they learn.

While writing these various letters, I tried to encourage him to read certain types of books. I felt that he should try to read more books about his culture. I did this purposely because many schools fail to incorporate multicultural books if there isn't a large number of those specifically cultured students in their classroom.

My many attempts were unsuccessful. This taught me something about Shawntez, and it also gave me impressions about his home environment. I don't think that learning about his culture was really encouraged. In effect, Shawntez did not show any interest in reading these types of books. Maybe it was because he wasn't able to understand the extreme importance of this information.

As we wrote back and forth to each other, I began to notice how important these letters were Shawntez. I had become his role model. Although he didn't read the books that I mentioned, he began to read books that were interesting to him. This was just as good. I knew that even though he wasn't really interested in the topics that I mentioned, he would gain interest over time. So, I am happy regardless.

Shawntez opened up a whole new world for me. I made sure that I gave him my home address so that we could write to each other throughout the summer. I even contemplated going to Missouri. My dream has come true. If this is what teaching is about, I can't wait.

Shawntez's last letter included this response:

Anthony I going to miss you you're the first person I ever wrote to I hope you have a really good summer. But I want you to remember me by my sticker and I will write you.

The boys heard each other and benefited from each other. The exchange allowed students to discover more about themselves and for some others, someone very different from themselves.

The elementary teacher and I wanted the experience to have a reading component. We wanted to encourage reading and sharing of reading. So college students read children's books at appropriate levels for their pen pals. The children wrote about what they were reading in class or on their own.

Through the sharing each group influenced the other. One college student wrote about If You Give a Mouse a Cookie and the pen pal responded with a description of If You Give a Moose a Muffin. An elementary student expressed her enjoyment of the *Magic School Bus* series and how it helped her understand science, her pen pal began to explore the series more. When a college student shared Jingle All the Way, the children stated that she had already read it and was currently reading Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon. Of course, that led the college student to the Amber Brown series. Each group encouraged the other to read by the letter writing. College students also gained insights about children reading, as expressed in this reflection:

It seems as if the *Goosebumps* and the *Fudge* book series are very popular in this grade. The kids enjoy books that are suspenseful, and relate somewhat to their own life. The *Goosebumps* books are absolutely disgusting at times, but that is what separates them from the "baby books" they read in first and second grade.

At the end of the exchange, college students were required to reflect on the experience from a personal perspective and as future teacher. The students arranged the letters in sets, elementary and college student, to survey the writing as a means of learning about a person (including themselves). As Burt reflected on his third grader's letters, he expressed:

> Their [third graders'] writing and thinking processes also became evident in the letters. The first things that I noticed was that they tended to spell difficult words like they sound, and their printing was not as neat as it will become in a few years. As for the content, it did not flow well. The writing and thinking process appeared to be a reflection of each other. The writing would jump from one thought to another. When I read the letters, it was as if I was reading a variety of brief thoughts that popped into their head as they were writing. A lot of questions were included in all of their letters. In a way, it supports my earlier statement that suggested that third graders are a creative and curious bunch.

From the correspondence, future teachers heard and saw what elementary students are like through authentic, first hand experience. As college students saw and read letters from elementary students, the diversity in a classroom became apparent, diversity in ability levels, interests, attitudes, and backgrounds.

Although my primary interest was in the college students' growth from the experience, I also knew that the elementary students would gain from the experience. Comments from the elementary students express the gains:

> "I kind of liked writing to a pen pal. Sometimes I didn't know what to say, but sometimes I did. I liked reading her letters."
> "I liked to see what books they read. I told them what I read."
> "I learned how to write letters...and I met new people."
> "I didn't like writing the letters, but writing to pen pals was pretty cool."

During parent-teacher conferences, parents commented on how wonderful the experience had been for their children and thought it was a very good idea. The children were eager to share their letters at home.

Through the pen pal exchange students discovered more about themselves and someone different from themselves. Voices and friendships developed. College students made the transition from student to teacher as they modeled language arts and analyzed letters from a teacher's perspective. The exchange provided an authentic means of sharing books and developing writing. Handwriting became an issue for both groups for college students are too used to computers and elementary students are developing styles. Both needed to practice legible handwriting. For messages to be understood in the letters, sentence structure and word choice became issues in conveying meaning.

Surprisingly, the concept of time for the process was one area that both groups had some difficulty grasping. College students had to learn that elementary students needed time to write in comparison to their ability to write back quickly. Each group had to learn that mail delivery time was at least a two week period between posting and receiving. Both teachers had to contend with the frequent questioning of "Have they arrived yet?"

Is the experience worth the effort? Yes, is the response of both teachers. The elementary teacher enjoyed the project and wanted to do it again. Beside, the writing aspect, she liked the idea of the students exchanging information

about books read. For me at the college level, it gives my beginning education majors an opportunity to meet elementary students on a first hand basis. On both ends, it is a meaningful, authentic learning experience.

Two college student's reaction convey the many benefits of the assignment:

> Initially, I was reluctant to write considering that it would be time consuming and boring. However, after I began writing and receiving letters, I started looking forward to it. I felt it to be very gratifying in terms of pure enjoyment. It was something to look forward to during my very busy schedule.

> I enjoyed doing this assignment. It never seemed like a hassle, and even though I am 21 it was still exciting to get my pen pal letters and read what they had to say. I enjoyed reading children's books so I could share them with my pen pals. I learned a lot through this experience, and had benefited from this activity. I would really like to implement this kind of activity into a classroom of my own someday. For now though, on the college end, it was well worth it.

I encourage elementary and teacher educators to develop partnerships for pen pal exchanges. Voices and friendships developed when individuals write freely of their interests. Listen to these comments:

> Third grader: "I hope the next third grade can experience what we did, because it is pretty cool."

> Third grader and college student: I never had one [pen pal] before. Thank you for the chance.

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